

AMERICAN LITERATURE

IN THE

NINETEENTH CENTURY.

FOR THE

DEGREE OF B.L.

BY

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The Nineteenth Century was ushered in with very bright prospects, particularly for America. She was just gaining for herself a sure stronghold in literary as well as in other respects. This century had its literary beginning with Bryant and Irving; they opened the way and many others have followed in their footsteps, till our century is such that in some respects, it has never been surpassed.

Shakespeare has not yet been equalled in his drama, nor Milton in his great epic, but in real learning and high advancement this century has not been equalled. Homer and Virgil of ancient times; and later Goethe and Schiller of Germany; Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton of England; and Petrarch of Italy, a contemporary of Chaucer; all these have aided literature in its onward course, some taking a great

step, others working slowly and surely. All, however, contributing nobly and grandly to the progress of literature in its struggle for existence. But what one century taken alone has done more; nay, even as much to advance the civilization of man and has so aided in his higher civilization? And again, what one country has done more than our own short-lived Republic? It has existed but one short century in

independence. It had made some advancement before this, however, had made a beginning that helped it on its way; but yet there was not that freedom of thought, that earnest desire and love for a country which enables a people to write more from the heart, and which now characterizes the Americans as a people and aids so much in the growth of literature.

Before the independence of our country, we were to quite

an extent dependent on the mother country for our literature. America did not feel strong enough to walk independently into literature, but step by step has she placed herself on a level with her mother country and also with the continental countries of Europe. She made a feeble beginning by imitating England in her first attempts, yet this was all she could do under the circumstances in which she was placed, for she

consisted then of but a few colonies under the care and protection of England. Our ancestors had done enough to incur her displeasure and they could not very well take very great measures in literature. Nor had they the leisure, for the greater portion of their time was occupied in procuring the necessities of life, and protecting themselves and their families from the violent attacks of the Indians.

One of the causes of the emigration of our Pilgrim Fathers to America was to seek a land in which they should be free to worship their Maker in whatever manner suited them best. As a natural consequence of this, the first writers were principally writers on theology. But they gradually became stronger and felt more and more keenly the shackles that bound them to England, till their love for liberty and

for their fellowmen, made them resolve to throw off the bonds and be a free country. This done, they wrote more freely and naturally enough, better. They became less imitative of England, brought forth new ideas of their own, and struggled till America has reached now a higher standpoint than has ever been attained by any other country in so short a time.

One of the greatest aids,

and we might almost say the greatest to the advancement of literature, is the Press. We cannot appreciate the good this has really done us unless we compare the present with the past. As we look back, we see scarcely any homes made cheerful and home-like by interesting and attractive books; we see no spacious libraries in the homes of the wealthy nor any public libraries or reading rooms for the

use of the poorer classes.

In 1830, the United States stood fourth in rank among the nations that could write; at the present time it stands first. This certainly shows the great progress made by our country in the short space of fifty years. In the same year, 1830, the United States was second to Germany alone in the number of school children, and in 1870, it ranked ahead at the rate of 19 to 17/10.

These few statistics clearly show the great progress America is making in the Nineteenth Century.

In looking at the literature of this century to obtain a more correct view of it, it may be well to notice the three principal divisions into which literature may be divided, prose poetry and oratory. Under prose, we would class the novel, the newspaper and history.

The true novel may be and

often is a very instructive work; its true aim is to delineate human character as it really is or may be, and must not go beyond that. However, the author must not give his characters impossible duties to perform. If he does and then permits his characters to accomplish the duties, it is more properly a romance, which is often considered very objectionable.

Historical novels are proba-

tly the most beneficial of all novels; characters in history are selected and their lives and times presented in an interesting manner. The author must bring out and illustrate that which he is describing, naturally and truthfully.

Almost the best novel in American literature and one that has a circulation over the entire globe, is Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin". It has

been translated into many of the European languages, and is read very nearly as much in Europe as it is in America. It is an instructive novel and its end is to bring the evils of slavery before the public mind; it accomplishes its object very satisfactorily.

Mrs. Stowe is a writer of excellent worth; she has written other works of almost equal merit with the work mentioned.

The newspaper has done much toward educating the lower classes of humanity; it chiefly gives the current news, but quite often brings before the public, some of the best literary productions of the day. It has one advantage over other productions; it can be scattered so widely over the country and at so little expense, that it often falls among many who could not purchase books. Its circulation

is yearly increasing.

The third head under prose, is history. It is the most important and instructive of literary works. Its aim is to recall past events and review them before the mind of the reader. It pleases as well as instructs when written in an interesting style.

It has been America's good fortune to possess many renowned historians among whom are Bancroft, Prescott,

Motley and Irving. He will notice to some extent the works and characteristics of Irving.

Originality is one of his chief characteristics; he possesses a keen insight into affairs and is especially capable of noticing the comical side.

The work for which he is especially noted is his "Knicker-bocker" a history of New York in colonial times.

This is famous for the originality and the unique

style in which it is written.

There is a grave drollery running through it, which gives it a fascination that holds the reader's attention fixed to it, while giving the history of the state, in such a manner, it also contains real and solid history in it, which renders it very valuable as an history. The characters of our Dutch Ancestors are carefully studied and well-pictured; he points out

their peculiar traits in quite an amusing way. By this history alone, Irving has won a fame in England as well as at home; he has not been equalled in his peculiar manner of writing. His style is simple; he does not make a display of great learning nor of high sounding language. Irving is known by all the English speaking peoples. He enjoyed his fame con-

siderably before his death, as many of the old writers did not; they having died in poverty and neglect, their fame coming after them. Irving's life was successful; the world is better for his having lived in it.

A great mind in a nation always possesses an influence over the people at home, and abroad also. It naturally takes the lead and will draw the nation up af-

ter it, Bryant and Longfellow each possess a great mind and drew the poetry, lining people nearer their own level.

William Cullen Bryant was one of our first poets; he has awakened in every one who has acquainted himself with his poetry, a deeper insight. His love of nature was intense; he studied deep into the existence of natural phenomena. Bryant's style, though

not entirely his own, was elegant; he gave it a melody and rhythm that had not characterized it before. He had such a love and respect for his fellow men, as could not but win their love in return, lifting them to a higher level, nearer to his own standard, and drawing out the poetic nature that is in every man's heart. While reading his poems, one cannot but feel the same impulses,

thought to a less degree, that he must have felt while composing them. This is the case chiefly with his Thanatopsis, the poem by which he is best known. In it, his most beautiful thought is his picture of the last hour that can come to each man but once; he does not describe death as a thing to be avoided and not to be thought about, but simply as a quiet rest dreaming pleasant dreams.

Bryant is a national poet. In describing his country, he does it with a deep love for it. When reading his descriptions of nature and her woods, we are there pictured conspicuously before us. He loves nature from the depths of his heart and in this respect, he is our best poet. We only hope the coming years may be blessed with more such poets as Bryant.

But to pass on to Longfellow.
He is the most popular of
American poets; he is not as
great as Bryant, but he
seems to come nearer home
to us. When reading Long-
fellow, we seem to live with
him, to move as his charac-
ters move and to have as
much interest in them as
if they were real people in
our every day life, in whom
we are deeply interested.
Longfellow is loved, his poems

read, and his influence al-
most as deeply felt in Eu-
rope as at home. He is a
great lover ^(of nature); probably he is
not characterized by the same
nor as deep a love as is
Bryant, but yet his descriptions
clearly picture to us the
woods, streams and plains
he is describing. He is call-
ed the artistic poet of Amer-
ica; it is his power and the
admirable choice and ar-
rangement of his words and

sentences that chiefly characterize him. His poems are melodiously smooth and touching beyond description. His characters are carefully and accurately pictured. Who that has read his Evangeline cannot as plainly see her, as if she were standing before them. And especially when she is wandering in search of Gabriel, the look of weariness and yet a determination to con-

tinue in her search until he is found or she perishes in the attempt. The pale face, the sad, dreamy, misty eyes, seeking and seeking and yet never as tired as to give up entirely. It cannot be strange that with such poets as Bryant and Longfellow, America is more poetry loving than any other country. It is freedom of thought, this grand freedom of thought that

has produced such men, and consequently our country is better prepared for them, more ready to realize their greatness and to be affected by them.

Only a few words can be given here to the oratory of our century. We will mention only Webster, Clay and Calhoun; all were chiefly characterized by their patriotism, their intense love for their country

and fellow-men. Of the three, Webster was the greatest; he had great clearness of mind and thought, a remarkable faculty of presenting an argument in its best light. His presence and manner of delivery were commanding, fitted to convince and to gain his points.

Calhoun was the best qualified to argue abstract principles in contra position to

Webster, who argued concrete principles. They were dissimilar in yet another respect, Calhoun's style of delivery was very pleasing while Webster's was more commanding. Calhoun possessed a remarkable power in holding the close attention of his listeners. His power to argue was intense; he would put his strongest adversaries to thinking strongly on his side of the question.

Clay was not the gifted orator that either Webster or Calhoun was; he was a straight forward speaker and presented his points, when arguing, in an out spoken and blunt manner, but not always in the clearest light. He had a mind that studied human nature more than any thing else.

The names and works of these three men, will live for

centuries after them, and their influence will always be felt.

Twenty years of this century are still left to us. Much must and much will be done in that time. This is only a period of development preparing to usher in a new creative period.

As a people become more and more civilized, literary writers become more numerous and the literature

reaches a higher standard. So it is with America; she has but just made a beginning in the work there is for her to do, and has now attained as high a degree of civilization as any other nation; and literature and science are advancing rapidly.

People are encouraging literary progress and as the wealth of the nation increases, more time will

be had to devote to the cultivation of letters. Higher advancement and civilization produce great men, and these men help to improve the nation, and so open the way for yet greater men to come after them. There are yet large fields of literature to be cultivated. America is expected to bring forth her share of the workers, which as the years roll on, must become

more and more numerous. Much has been done for America and much is expected from her.

The
End.